

# Planning strategies for dealing with population decline

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# Planning strategies for dealing with population decline: experiences from the Netherlands



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**Abstract** This paper explores the selection and implementation of planning strategies and land use instruments for dealing with population decline in three different regions in the Netherlands. The study shows that each region developed very specific responses that can be explained by the different discourses that dominated planning and policymaking in that region. Although the perceptions about population decline, its consequences and suitable responses are strongly context specific, in all three regions responsible governments deemed it necessary to adapt existing policies and plans and to tailor strategies to a situation with population decline. The study also shows that ideas about using planning as a tool to stimulate economic growth prevail in the studied regions, but that it are precisely these ideas that hamper the development and implementation of policies for dealing with population decline. The paper also illustrates how Evolutionary Governance Theory can be useful for explaining why regions take different routes in dealing with population decline and for analysing the different dependencies that influence the selection of strategies.

**Keywords:** population decline, spatial planning, strategy, land use policy.

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## 1. Introduction

Demographic changes influence the use and organization of land and the related policies of cities and regions (Markey et al., 2014; Manson et al., 2016; Kempenaar et al., 2015; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2012; Pallagst et al., 2009; Syssner & Meijer, 2017; Wiechmann, 2008). Particularly if demographic changes are not anticipated, are rapidly unfolding, or imply population decline, they can challenge existing policies and practices and spur new strategies (Hospers, 2014; Hall et al., 2017).

Demographic decline is a phenomenon that several cities and regions across the globe are confronted with. Yet the way in which it is experienced and addressed can hugely vary. In countries like Canada, the USA, and Australia for example, geographic remoteness and lock-ins to resource dependency are often seen as relevant issues (Jones, 2002; Ryser et al., 2014; Cristina et al., 2012; Martinez-Fernandez et al., 2016). In the European context, a growing body of literature elaborates on the socioeconomic consequences of population decline faced by some rural regions and post-industrial cities (Nelle et al., 2017; Ročák et al., 2016; Wiechmann & Bontje, 2015). One of the countries in which population decline has increasingly attracted scientific attention is the Netherlands.

In the Netherlands, ongoing processes of urbanization have long diverted attention from developments in regions experiencing significant depopulation. In these regions, population decline is often characterized by the co-evolution of different developments and their consequences, e.g. a reduced number of jobs and an ageing population lead to a diminishing level of public and private resources for new investments, in turn resulting in a further reduction of jobs and young people leaving the areas (Haartsen & Venhorst, 2010). Population decline in that sense is understood as both a driver and an effect of economic bust situations. In recent years, population decline has attracted attention from practitioners, policymakers, and researchers. However, little attention has so far been given to the selection and use of different planning strategies for dealing with population decline (Hospers, 2013; Tietjen & Jørgensen, 2016).

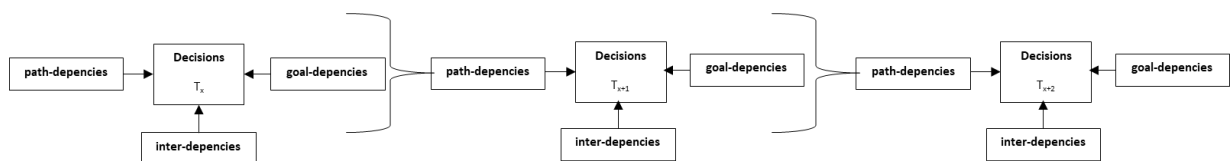
The aim of this paper is to analyse how established governance systems condition the development of planning strategies and land use instruments. We do this by analysing planning responses to population decline in three Dutch regions: East-Groningen, South-Limburg, and De Achterhoek. In doing so we take evolutionary perspective to take into account the developments over time in the region and how planning strategies co-evolve with other elements of governance (Van Assche et al., 2014). This analysis will provide insights in how planning strategies are rooted in existing governance systems and shaped by shifting expectations about the future.

In the following sections, we first introduce the theoretical framework that guided our research, followed by a brief elaboration of the context of population decline in the Netherlands. We then describe the developments in the three regions studied, followed by a comparison of the different responses to population decline. In the discussion section, we reflect on the findings and the general lessons that can be taken from them; this is followed by the main conclusions of the research.

## 2. Theoretical framework

In their introduction to the special issue Van Assche et al. (2019) elaborate on the institutional capacity of a community as an important factor that influences the opportunities for dealing with dramatic transformations, such as economic ups and downs or sudden changes in population terms. They mention, among other factors, the role of governments, the time horizons of governance systems, the ability to imagine alternative futures, and the availability of particular land use instruments as elements of this institutional capacity (ibid). We will use Evolutionary Governance Theory (EGT) to gain a better understanding of the influence of these different factors on the

selection of strategies and land use instruments. EGT is a theoretical perspective that focuses on the ways in which the different elements of a governance system, such as actors, institutions, and discourses, co-evolve, shape change processes and the possibilities and limits to planning and steering (Van Assche et al., 2014). An evolutionary perspective is relevant as existing forms of governance influence which issues are framed as relevant problems, how these problems are understood and how responses are developed, while at the same time the forms of governance are changing under influence of ongoing social dynamics, including the discussions on problems and solutions and the decisions that follow from these discussions. Central to EGT is the notion that decision-making processes are marked by various dependencies that shape the potentialities as well as limits to planned interventions (fig 1.). Identifying these dependencies and their impact on governance helps explaining why certain strategies are chosen over others and how the selection of strategies and instruments influences the further evolution of governance.



**Fig. 1.** Illustration of how a governance path is formed by consecutive decisions, influenced by and shaping path-, inter- and goal-dependencies. For our study the main decision that we focus on is the selection of planning strategies.

A distinction can be made between path-, inter-, and goal dependencies. Path dependency is a concept that addresses how legacies from the past influence current decision-making processes and thereby shape particular development paths (Pierson, 2000). Much of the literature on path dependencies shows how particular institutional arrangements or the presence of powerful actors restrict options for change (Mahoney, 2000; Tronts et al., 2014). More broadly, path dependencies can be found in existing decision-making structures, the current division of roles and responsibilities, the presence of particular expertise and knowledge, or a dependence on particular resources (Carson & Carson, 2016; Halseth et al., 2014). Furthermore, the prominence of particular discourses and their influence on governance can create influential path dependencies, making it difficult to see things in a different way and adapt governance to changing circumstances (Buschmann & Oels, 2019; Van Assche et al., 2012). Discourse is, following Hajer and Versteeg (2005, p. 175), defined as “an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices”. These discourses are reflected in societal, political, and scientific debates about population decline and can get institutionalized in various policy documents (Feindt & Oels, 2005; Van Assche et al., 2014). In the context of this study these include discourses on the drivers and effects of population decline, as well as more general discourses on governance, spatial planning and the role of public and private organizations.

Another set of dependencies that merits attention are interdependencies. These first of all refer to the ways in which actions and decisions of one actor depend on those of others (Alexander, 2001). The interdependencies between actors influence how particular actors can and will act, the forms of cooperation, and the way in which actors deal with conflicting ideas or interests. Here, trust is seen as vital to overcome conflicts and smooth the process between interdependent actors (de Vries et al., 2014). Secondly, the interdependencies between actors and institutions require attention. The position of particular actors and their relation with other actors is shaped by institutional structures, while the actions of actors will influence and change these institutional structures (Beunen & Patterson, 2016). In the planning context, those interdependencies for example shape the roles and competences of governmental actors and their relation with various agencies, businesses, and citizens. Thirdly, the relation between actors and particular forms of knowledge is relevant, because

actors will influence which forms of knowledge will be developed and used, and, conversely, knowledge dynamics, e.g. learning processes or shifts in ideologies, might trigger institutional change as well as shifts in the roles of particular actors.

Finally, the influence of shared ideas about the future. The influence of such ideas on decision-making is understood as a goal dependency (Van Assche et al., 2014). Ideas on the extent and impact of population decline can, for example, form strong attractors that pull decisions in a certain direction. Also other ideas on the future of a particular region that are embedded in visions, plans, norms, or other institutions can act as points of reference that help to explain why certain actions and decisions are preferred over others. Goal dependencies can include positive as well as negative images about the future and thus relate to both preferred and unwanted directions.

Analysing these different dependencies helps to explain the selection of particular planning strategies and land use instruments at a particular moment in time and to unravel the temporal dimension of governance in which earlier decisions can in many ways influence the path that unfolds. Decisions made earlier thus influence the set of dependencies and they can create new ones. Once a particular strategy is chosen, it can lead, for example, to new or revised institutions, to changing relations between actors involved, and it can influence discourses on population decline and spatial planning. The selection and use of strategies is thus part of a governance path that is both a driver for, as well as an outcome of, the selected strategies.

### **3. Method**

In order to gain more insight in the ways in which governance systems influence the selection of planning strategies, we compared the development in three different regions in the Netherlands currently facing population decline: East-Groningen, South-Limburg, and De Achterhoek (fig 2). These regions were selected as they all face population decline, but responded differently (Hospers & Reverda, 2015). Whereas De Achterhoek focussed on local initiatives, Zuid-Limburg responded by aiming for large scale spatial investments to counteract decline, and East-Groningen by focussing on real estate investments. Although the regions are embedded in the same Dutch government structure, the regions differ in the involvement and roles of various public and private actors in the selection and implementation of planning strategies and in the historical development of population decline.

The study is based on data collected for earlier studies towards planning practices in each region as well as an additional document analysis of relevant policy documents and related reports on population decline. Information about the East Groningen case was drawn from 18 semi-structured interviews with governmental and non-governmental experts and citizens, as well as a document analyses and field visits (Van Assche et al., 2012). For the South-Limburg case data consisted of 11 semi-structured interviews with government representatives and civic initiatives around two local projects, observation data of two public meetings, and a document analyses (Nietiedt & De Vries, 2015). The analysis of De Achterhoek was based on observations of meetings of citizen initiatives with governmental actors of five projects, 14 in-depth open interviews with governmental and non-governmental actors, a document analyses, and field visits (Syssner & Meijer, 2017).

Additional information was gathered by analysing policy documents and research reports from the periods in which population decline was place high on the agenda and addressed in planning policies (East-Groningen: 1997-2017; South-Limburg: 1997-2017; De Achterhoek: 2009-2017). In De

Achterhoek population decline is a more recent issue that was only discussed from 2009 on and therefore the relevant time period for this region is a bit shorter than in both other regions.

Based on our theoretical framework we developed a coding frame (David & Sutton, 2004) to identify relevant actors and their ideas on possible planning strategies and to analyse prevailing discourses on population decline and their evolution over time, whereby we looked at patterns of communications, in relation to the contexts in which they occur (Berg, 2009). In our last coding step, we analysed which strategies and land use instruments have been used, how their selection was shaped by different discourses and how different dependencies shaped the decision-making processes. We identified how legacies of the past, relations between actors and institutions, and ideas about the future motivated particular decisions at different moments of time. Drawing on the information from the analysis we briefly describe the main developments in each region as well as the factors that help explaining the selection of planning strategies and land use instruments.



Figure 2: The regions in the Netherlands



## **4. Dealing with population decline**

### **4.1. General overview**

The overall population of the Netherlands has increased steadily to 17 million in 2017. It is expected that this population will further grow to about 18.4 million by 2060 (Stoeldraijer et al., 2017). It is, however, also predicted that urbanization processes will create increasing regional differences (De Jong & Daalhuizen, 2014). For some regions, this will imply that the population will start to decline in the near future; in others, population decline has already started. It is mainly the regions on the borders of the Netherlands that face population decline, whereas the west faces population increase. The issue of population decline has been attracting particular attention from governments, other societal actors, and scientists since 2005 (Haartsen & Venhorst, 2010; Verwest et al., 2008). This attention has been accompanied by a growing awareness that population decline can have a significant impact on the socioeconomic development of these regions (Verwest & van Dam, 2010; De Jong & Van Duin, 2010).

Various parties, including governments and policy advisors, expected a range of negative consequences as a result of population decline (De Groot & Schonewille, 2012). These included reduced provision of emergency services and healthcare, decreasing numbers of children per school, and the disappearance of facilities like supermarkets, libraries, and pubs that not only provide a service, but also have a social function (Christiaanse & Haartsen, 2017; Ročak, 2018); Anon, 2016). When the topic was high on the political agenda, many conferences and meetings were organized to discuss the drivers of population decline, the problems experienced, and possible solutions.

After a couple of years, population decline lost its prominent position in national debates. However, several important policy decisions were made at national level. First, regions designated as *Krimpregio* (region with population decline) were allocated additional funding to deal with the main problems identified (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2015). Second, the national government decided that population decline was not a national issue and therefore that provinces and regions should assume responsibility for dealing with it (Ministerie Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2014, 2016).

### **4.2 East-Groningen**

The province of Groningen, with the city of Groningen at its centre, is situated in the northern part of the Netherlands. The province has about 583,000 inhabitants. In recent years, the population of the province has experienced a minor decline, but also huge differences between the city and municipalities in the eastern part of the province. Because it hosts a large university, the city of Groningen and the surrounding areas have a growing and young population, whereas the municipalities in East-Groningen have an older and declining population. In many of these municipalities, the population has been declining since the 1980s (Van Til et al., 2007), and the issue of liveability has long been on the agenda (Bouwman, 1959). Currently, this eastern part of Groningen has about 60,000 inhabitants, but this number is expected to decline further to about 47,000 by 2025 (Dijkstal & Mans, 2009).

The differences between the urban centre and the municipalities in the eastern part of the province are addressed in the policies of the province and of relevant municipalities. Specific policies have been put in place to address the particularities of population decline (Provincie Groningen 2010; 2013c; 2015). As far back as 1997, it was decided that these municipalities could authorize new housing developments only if these were needed to facilitate internal growth (Provincie Groningen, 1997). Other houses would be approved only if existing ones were demolished. At local level,

population decline was first addressed in the 1990s when the municipality of Delfzijl presented a plan to restructure housing in the area in order to stop population decline (Gemeente Delfzijl, 1998). At provincial level, population decline became a policy issue around 2007, when various studies were commissioned by responsible governments (e.g. Van Dam et al. 2009; Dijkstal & Mans, 2009; Companen, 2009; Ponds et al., 2013).

When population decline made it to the political agenda, it was understood as a relatively large problem that threatened the liveability of the area (Dijkstal & Mans, 2009). This perspective is reflected in the main provincial document:

*“How do we maintain quality of life in areas where fewer and fewer people live? That question is starting to become more urgent. Population decline that started years ago will continue strongly in the coming years and become tangible. Young people move away, the people who stay there, getting older. And that has far-reaching social and economic consequences.”* (Provincie Groningen, 2010, p. 4)

The dominant discourse could be found in a series of studies and policy documents (e.g. Van Dam et al., 2009; Dijkstal & Mans, 2009; Provincie Groningen, 2013a, c). These documents focused on demographic changes, consequences for the housing market, and possible strategies for dealing with the changing situation. The dominant discourse focused on the consequences for the real estate market, and an important role was assigned to governments to find a proper balance between new developments, restructuring, and demolishing houses. For many inhabitants, the loss of amenities and services was not a big issue (Gardenier, 2012), and some of them complained about the fact that responsible governments so often depicted the region as poor, unemployed, and badly educated in order to attract funding from national government (Van Assche et al., 2012).

A key driver of policy was a shared acknowledgement of the need for regional cooperation between local authorities, the province, and various other public and private organizations (Van Til et al., 2007; Commissie Tielrooij, 2000). “Population decline requires a joint approach by municipalities, central government, social organizations and the province, each from their own role” (Provincie Groningen, 2010, p. 4). This need for cooperation is reflected in agreements about restrictions on new developments, distribution of costs, and shared knowledge development (Provincie Groningen, 2013b). The province had a prominent coordination and funding role (Provincie Groningen, 2010; Provincie Groningen, 2013d; Van Kampen & De Jong, 2015).

Ideas about solutions gradually shifted from preventing population decline to adapting policies and plans to a new situation with fewer inhabitants. Recent policies clearly show a shift in focus from earlier strategies that focused on initiating new development to attract inhabitants and create new jobs (Provincie Groningen, 2016). One of the most remarkable projects that reflects the former strategy was the Blauwestad, a project that aimed to develop 1,500 new houses in the area, especially for people from the more densely populated western part of the country (Noordelijke Rekenkamer, 2010). The responsible authorities, the province, and three municipalities expected that this project would enhance the liveability of the region and create new jobs. The development started in 2004, but soon it became clear that the expectations about the project were highly overestimated. Few houses were sold, many of them to local people, and the project did not really enhance the liveability of the area. An independent study concluded that the plan ignored relevant information about the area and its future, did not fit the actual housing market, and was based on risky deals with private developers (Noordelijke Rekenkamer, 2010).

The strategies changed with the growing awareness that population decline would be a permanent phenomenon and that this could not be reversed through large-scale housing developments. In 2010,



a provincial plan on population decline was presented (Provincie Groningen, 2010). The plan acknowledged the need to revise existing policies and to develop a joint strategy with all involved authorities and civil society organizations. It presented actions focused on communication, the development of regional Living and Liveability Plans (*Woon- en Leefbaarheidsplannen in Dutch*) experiments, strategic cooperation, knowledge development, and socioeconomic revitalization. The overall aim of the plan was to create an attractive living and working environment. The plan made clear that revitalizing the region would be very costly because numerous buildings needed to be demolished and partly replaced. “The total costs of the further transformation of the housing stock in the regions Eemdelta and East Groningen is estimated at around € 750 million, including the redevelopment of public space” (Provincie Groningen, 2010, p. 32). In order to address this challenge, three more detailed Living and Liveability Plans plans were drawn up (Stuurgroep Wonen en Voorzieningen Eemdelta, 2012a, b; KAW architecten en adviseurs, 2011; Companen, 2011). These plans include agreements between involved parties about the maximum number of new houses and about the distribution of the cost for demolishing empty buildings. In order to finance the implementation of these plans, a demolition fund was put in place. The plans also describe the projects that need to be realized to enhance and improve liveability, focusing on the concentration of amenities and the development of new jobs in the energy and tourism sectors. A large part of the available investment fund, €30 million for a period of 10 years, is targeted at physical measures, building maintenance, and public space.

The responses to population decline show some clear path dependencies and they reflect the interdependencies between the involved actors. The region has a longer history of population decline and was never very densely populated. This means that deviating from a growth path did not imply huge changes. The responses, however, drew on a strong belief in investment in new houses and infrastructure as drivers of economic development and of improved liveability, a belief that was clearly a legacy from times in which such investment could be made by the government. This belief was backed up by a planning system that allows governments to initiate large-scale projects and a political and a scientific landscape that offered little opposition to the underlying ideas (Noordelijke Rekenkamer, 2010). Investments in large-scale developments also created new path dependencies, because (financial) resources spent on one project could not be used for other initiatives, alternative developments were restricted in order to prevent competition with key projects, and fear of failure made governments reluctant to initiate new plans. The interdependencies between the different governments and private actors were clearly acknowledged and addressed in policies and plans. Deals were made to prevent competition between municipalities for new housing developments. Goal dependencies changed from a focus on stimulating growth as a precondition for socioeconomic welfare to a focus on facilitating population decline through coordinated strategies and re-developments. This new goal was widely shared by many of the involved parties, making it possible to work together towards a new future.

### **4.3 South-Limburg**

The province of Limburg, situated in the south of the Netherlands, largely forms a narrow strip between Germany and Belgium and has strong relations with neighbouring areas in both countries. In its recent history, the economy of South-Limburg was strongly characterized by coalmining, which led to a great influx of inhabitants (from 282,000 in 1900 to 728,000 inhabitants in 1950). At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Netherlands government decided to invest in coalmining in South-Limburg, where private companies had already been mining since 1815 (Ekamper, Van der Erf, Van der Graag, Henskens, & Van Poppel, 2003). In total, 13 mines were opened in the province, giving direct labour to 65,000 people and indirect to another 30,000. The mining industry played a strong role in the

development of the region. However, Limburg's mining history is rather short. After World War II, coalmining in the Netherlands became less profitable, and in 1974 the last mine closed, leaving thousands of people unemployed. Consequently, whereas several cities in the south were in the top 10 most attractive and economically prosperous cities in the 1950s, they are now regarded as places of economic decline (De Groot, Marlet, Teulings, & Vermeulen, 2010). Despite different policies and promises, job opportunities remained low in the former mining areas. Moreover, many governmental services formerly located in Limburg in order to counteract unemployment were relocated to the western part of the Netherlands.

Today, Limburg is a province with many regional differences, hosting a more agriculture-focused middle and north and a strongly urbanized south, which is also a popular tourist destination. In august 2018, 1,114,336 people were living in Limburg (CBS, 2018). Since 1997, the province has been experiencing population decline, and since 2002 also household decline, especially in the former mining areas (Verwest, 2011). Recently, other parts of Limburg have also been experiencing population decline. An ageing population and the migration of young people out the area are the two main trends.

The responses to population decline can be categorized in three distinct phases: first denial, then recognition, followed by counteraction. When population decline first became apparent in the 1990s, the various responsible authorities mainly ignored and denied it. Limburg's provincial authorities in particular mainly understood it as a temporary issue. It was not until 2005 that they mentioned decline in their strategic spatial vision (Provincie Limburg, 2005), when formulating the aims: "The current migration numbers, showing and outflow, has to be reduced. From 2010 onwards, we aim for a migration figure of 0." (p. 16). However, they did not adapt their plans to it. The province did not see population decline as a problem, and even openly questioned the demographic figures, partly because of demographic trends in the neighbouring areas in Germany and Belgium, which were not facing population decline. For the various municipalities also, population decline was not an issue for a long time. What played a major role here was the diversity amongst the municipalities, which made population less a collective issue to discuss. In addition, municipalities in the South-Limburg are relatively small and therefore demographic trends and their effects are less visible. Earlier research also shows (Verwest, 2011) that municipalities did not acknowledge the existence of population decline as this would mean recognizing that there was a problem, which they had neither the capacity nor the financial means to address.

This situation changed in 2005. In this recognition phase, population decline was understood as a problem. The regional organization Parkstad Limburg (a regional collective of various municipalities in the former mining area) in particular drew attention to it, stating that population decline was a problem affecting the liveability of the region (Parkstad Limburg, 2006) and that action needed to be taken.

*"The population decline in our region, de limited need for new houses in combination with the need to qualitatively transform our housing stock, requires a clear strategy and direction regarding regional housing policies. The 'sense of urgency' requires also clear agreements and strict commitment of all parties to achieve strong collaboration..." (Parkstad Limburg, 2006, p. 5).*

The municipalities decided to address the issue collectively, as they were all faced with the issue. However, this did not mean that there were no differences between them, and several of them found it difficult to acknowledge population decline individually. Recognition of the problem, however, did not automatically mean that concrete measures or policy instruments were developed;

this took some years. In this phase, the province in particular remained rather vague but, in recognizing the population decline, all stakeholders labelled it as a problem that needed to be solved. The measures discussed related mainly to creating jobs, restructuring the housing stock, and limiting new housebuilding (Gerrichhauzen & Dogterom, 2007; Heerlen, 2009; Parkstad Limburg, 2008; Regio Zuid-Limburg, 2017). However, executing these measures was not deemed necessary according to the same policy plan, as most plans for new developments would never be executed anyway.

After 2006 that the province and the regional collective Parkstad Limburg started to develop instruments to deal with the population decline in South-Limburg (Verwest, 2011). The most important measures were directed at spatial developments and the labour market, e.g. the housing market, commercial space, and industrial areas. The instruments focused on restructuring, demolishing houses, building a limited number of new high-end houses, and creating an attractive labour market (Parkstad Limburg, 2007, 2008). These measures were proposed mainly to counteract population decline. Examples of such measures include the development of attractive housing (Stein, Sittard), shopping malls (Roermond), and a ring road (Eastern Mining area). Other measures focused on attracting new inhabitants and visitors through events and advertising. In this whole phase, the municipalities played a less clear role in the debates – partly because they were represented by the Parkstad collective and partly because the municipalities displayed large differences in demographic changes. Whereas municipalities around Maastricht (Eijsden, Meerssen, and Vaals) faced population growth, others (Onderbanken, Simpelveld, and Voerendaal) faced population decline. Although the interdependencies between different municipalities are acknowledged, it proves difficult to coordinate actions as most actors focus on their own issues and interests.

Together the municipalities have developed a vision on housing developments in which they clearly address the interdependencies between the different municipalities:

*“The Structural Vision for Living South Limburg (SVWZL) is a joint, South Limburg spatial vision on the housing market, drawn up by the 18 municipalities of South Limburg, based on the realization that spatial developments in one municipality have direct influence on other municipalities. Furthermore municipalities recognize that competition between municipalities, certainly with the current population development and the ambitions that South Limburg has as a knowledge region has, leads to negative effects that undermine the strengths of the region” (Region Zuid Limburg, 2016, p 4.).*

In the vision the municipalities agree to restrict new housing developments and to stimulate housing demolition where needed and they agree on a financial plan in which the gains of new developments are partly used to cover the cost of demolition elsewhere. Although the implementation of this vision proved to be challenging, the municipalities all want to continue their joint effort to deal with the consequences of population decline for the housing market (Provincie Limburg, 2018).

Over the years the strategies for dealing with population decline changed, but the discourse in which population decline is framed as a problem that needs to be prevented prevailed for a long time. This dominant discourse proved to be an important path-dependency making it difficult for envision alternative views on population decline and to develop different spatial strategies. The interdependencies between different local communities were only partly acknowledged, making it difficult to develop and implement a joint strategy. The focus on investments in new housing developments, business parks and a new ring road, based on the idea to stimulate economic development, complicated the adaptation of strategies to changing circumstances since such solutions require long-term investments by various partners. These investments thus created a new path-dependency. Later on, the different actor developed regional agreements that played an

important role in addressing the interdependencies between local governments and that help working towards a shared vision. These agreements can be understood as a path-dependency, because changing initial agreements would mean letting down partners in the region and losing financial investments, as well as a goal dependency that keeps actors working towards agreed upon goals.

#### **4.4. De Achterhoek**

De Achterhoek (290,000 inhabitants) is a predominantly rural region situated in the eastern part of the Netherlands. Besides agriculture, the regional economy is characterized by small manufacturing industries. In contrast to East-Groningen and South-Limburg, De Achterhoek has no large cities or industries; it consists of many small villages and settlements and two larger towns: Doetinchem (44,600 inhabitants) and Winterswijk (23,600 inhabitants). Although its manufacturing industries show innovative potential, the local economy has been performing below the national average for years and shrank further during the recent economic crisis. Inhabitants of De Achterhoek are proud of their culture of self-organization, to which they refer as *Noaberschap* (neighbourhoodness). This stems from a past situation in which the rural population relied strongly on help from neighbours in times of need. Now *Noaberschap* forms a discourse on its own, referring to community building and the ability to establish local community-led planning projects or taking over public (Abbas & Commandeur, 2013).

In the last few years, the De Achterhoek population has stopped growing. For the coming decades, population change is forecasted: decline, ageing, and the selective out-migration of young (and more highly educated) people. Between 2010 and 2040, the total number of inhabitants is expected to drop by 8% (CBS, 2015). To prevent bust, local governments decided that an early recognition of problems was necessary, together with the development of alternative planning strategies. In 2009, when population decline became significant in De Achterhoek, Groningen and Limburg had already been dealing with bust for quite some time. Having witnessed the ineffectiveness of growth-oriented land use strategies in the other two regions, policymakers at municipal and regional level decided to tackle the problem differently. Instead of denying or reversing decline, the discourse focused at incorporating population decline into regional and local land use strategies. Fundamental to these strategies was a regional and multi-actor approach. To enhance regional cooperation in De Achterhoek, seven municipalities formed a platform (Regio Achterhoek) to tackle problems relating to bust and stimulate regional development. Although founded by municipalities, Regio Achterhoek also actively involves local businesses and societal organizations such as schools and housing cooperatives.

As soon as actors within the region announced the foundation of a regional cooperation, the establishment of Regio Achterhoek took off rather quickly. In 2009, the first explorations for regional cooperation took place, and in 2011 the seven involved municipalities presented, together with local businesses and societal organizations, their future plan: Achterhoek 2020 (Regio Achterhoek en Ministerie Binnenlandse Zaken, 2012). This plan contained regional strategies for economic development, housing, and infrastructure. More concretely, these strategies entailed projects for a network of fibre internet, facilitating 'smart' industries, sustainable energy, and a housing covenant. These strategies however are also marked with very open goals, and an informal way of working. A process manager working for Regio Achterhoek (interviewed in November 2012) explains their approach as follows:

*"We don't follow formalised procedures. Every now and then process managers come together, but actually much of the work is done outside meetings. In every working group consists of representatives from societal organisations, businesses and local governments. Together we try to grasp opportunities and form connections. But most of our work is actually about creating awareness concerning population and economical change, and that the old ways [government-centered decision-making and policy implementation] are not working anymore. This is, however, not easily changed"*

Almost a decade later, few of the projects have been realized. The housing covenant - an informal but institutionally weak agreement to reduce future housing development collectively - proved especially problematic to realize. Under the housing covenant, all seven municipalities and housing cooperatives agreed that, for a shrinkage-proof future, considerably fewer houses had to be built in the coming decade; initially, a reduction from 14,000 to 5,600 houses was proposed, and later this number was further reduced by 10% (Stuurgroep Regiovisie Wonen, 2015). For all municipalities, this would imply a serious loss. To share the loss and prevent rivalry among the municipalities, they agreed how the loss could be divided. However, calculations about the exact number of houses proved complicated and politically sensitive. From a regional perspective, it would be sensible to allow new-build houses in the more vital urban areas (Doetinchem and Winterswijk) (Hospers, 2013; Rutgers-Zoet & Hospers, 2018), but the other more rural municipalities objected as they feared increased decline and lack of a local mandate. At the annual spring dinner in 2012 the newly appointed chair of the Regio Achterhoek, and former minister of internal affairs Liesbeth Spies, called for action (Spies, 2012):

*"Regio Achterhoek is not the strongest trade mark in the world. However, the energy with which you started to turn the tide in 2009, seems to have faded. I can see four working groups, Regio Achterhoek, I can see meetings, but I wonder who is accountable for what. Most of our meetings are about procedures, but not the content of what needs to be done. Once at home, there is little commitment for the agreements made during our meetings. But in mean time the population is ageing and entrepreneurs are worried whether they can find qualified personnel in the near future."*

Nevertheless, anxiety about free-rider behaviour became a recurring theme in the discussions about regional cooperation. That one of the municipalities left the cooperation in 2016 is considered to be a low point. A study trip with all remaining stakeholders soon afterwards to the south of Limburg, however, led to a renewed engagement to solve problems collectively. Here, members of the regional cooperative observed the long-term effects of population decline and the need to act collectively. The two-hour bus drive was mentioned as another important factor in strengthening the informal ties between the stakeholders (Rutgers-Zoet & Hospers, 2018).

At local level, several municipalities focused on involving local communities and addressing their planning capacities. This local discourse did not only focus at maintaining liveability by stimulating community life, but also as a way to facilitate large budget cuts. Aldermen Han Boer (municipality of Berkelland) explains at the 2011-annual meeting of the Dutch association for municipalities (VNG) (Muskee, 2011) that three developments form the foundations of their policy change:

*"The new coalition foresees three large challenges, of which the financial crisis is the most critical. Besides this, is our population shrinking: in 2040 we will have 16 per cent less inhabitants and has the amount of seniors doubled. If we continue building new real estate with our blinkers on, we can demolish everything again in a later stage. And third, the process*

*of a retreating government has accelerated. Governments cannot take care of citizens happiness. Tasks should be allocated where they belong”.*

Through policy schemes and subsidy programmes, local communities in Berkelland and other Achterhoek-municipalities were stimulated to take over former municipal tasks. With these financial resources, a large number of communities projects to enhance local liveability and socioeconomic development. The chair of a community-led care cooperative (interviewed in 2016) points out that it was the Regio Achterhoek that inspired them to start an initiative:

*“In 2010 we had a meeting with Regio Achterhoek and all other village boards. They informed us about being a shrinking region, this was inevitable. If we would not act, we could end up as in Oost Groningen. However we also realized that there was no point in waiting for the municipality or Regio Achterhoek to act. To us, this was a big driver for taking faith into our own hands, and develop a multifunctional care accomodation.”*

The dominant discourse of accepting and facilitating the consequences of population decline in a cooperative and localised manner is the result of many path dependencies. The success of the community-led local approach can be explained by the long history of self-organization, which policymakers smartly tuned in to (Muskee, 2011). Participating communities, however, regularly criticize the – what they call – opportunistic attitude of municipalities towards community initiatives. They feel that all their long-running activities have now become part of a complicated political arrangement that they never asked for (Meijer & Ernste, 2019).

And yet both community initiatives and municipalities are interdependent. On the one hand, community initiatives need financial and practical support (like procedural knowledge) to realize their initiatives; support that can only be obtained through governmental bodies. Municipalities, on the other hand, often characterize community initiatives as a token of deliberation and/or promote citizen initiatives as part of their austerity policies (Meijer & Syssner, 2017).

The path dependencies displayed at regional level are more complex in nature. When population decline appeared on the national policy agenda, De Achterhoek was not experiencing the same rate of decline as other regions in the Netherlands. Therefore, De Achterhoek was first indicated as a ‘anticipating region’ rather than a ‘shrinking region’ like the two other regions in this study (VROM, VNG, & IPO, 2009). Being designated as an anticipating region, however, also implied less available funding for bust-related problems and less importance on the political agenda. Furthermore, De Achterhoek is a smaller region within a province and is competing with other (more vital) regions for recognition of their problems. Therefore, actors within De Achterhoek had difficulties finding political support and resources at higher political levels. Founding a regional organization was one way to organize themselves more effectively and lobby for support collectively. This lobby was very successful: De Achterhoek is now designated as a ‘shrinking region’ and receives additional funding to deal with the material effects of depopulation (Ministerie van Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, 2015). The actors therewith clearly acknowledge and address their interdependence. This cooperative approach has been praised and rewarded with additional subsidies for policy innovation (Platform 31, 2014; Spies, 2012), something which stimulated actors to continue working on the same path. There is a clear goal dependency evolving here: regional cooperation in De Achterhoek has become not only a means for dealing with population decline, but also a goal in its own right for receiving those extra funds. It is then perhaps not surprising that the De Achterhoek approach fits very well with the national discourse on population decline, which also focusses on involving other public and private actors actively, regional cooperation, and

encouragement of community initiatives (Ministerie Binnenlandse Zaken en Koningsrijksrelaties, 2014, 2016).

## **5. Responses to population decline**

The socioeconomic effects of population decline in the studied regions in the Netherlands are much less dramatic than in some other regions in Europe that face population decline (Haase, Bernt, Großmann, Mykhnenko, & Rink, 2016). Yet, from a Dutch perspective, they are certainly noticeable. This explains why in the past decade much time and many resources have been spent on the issue (Kempenaar, van Lierop, Westerink, et al., 2015; Rijksoverheid, 2014; Verwest, 2011). Comparison of the different regions shows that the selection of strategies and instruments used to respond to population decline is influenced by a number of dependencies, including the presence of particular discourses, specific institutions, and the dependence of involved actors on others. In this section we explore these dependencies more into detail.

In general the responses to population decline can largely be explained by the dominant planning discourse that focusses on a large role for local and provincial governments in facilitating growth, stimulating new developments, and a competition between municipalities for citizens and businesses. This discourse is embedded in various institutions that shape the capacity of local governments for planning and that form the basis for new spatial developments. A situation of population decline makes it difficult to uphold this planning approach that strongly depends on growth and new developments. Population decline proved particularly problematic to local governments because a devolution of various governmental responsibilities made them even more dependent on citizens and businesses for tax income and new spatial development as an extra source of revenue (Buitelaar, 2010). Early responses were mainly shaped by this dominant discourse and focussed on denial, seeing population decline as a temporary issue, and on investing even more resources in spatial developments. Only later came the realization that population decline should be seen as a more permanent development and that policies and plans needed to be adapted.

A closer look reveals two main discourses on the issue of population decline. The first discourse focuses on growing vacancy numbers, declining real estate values, and the question of who should finance debts and the restructuring of neighbourhoods and business areas. This discourse is found mainly among governments and real estate experts and fits well with the more general discourse of Dutch planning (especially strong in East-Groningen and South-Limburg). A second discourse focuses on social aspects and on the question of how liveability in the regions could be maintained (especially strong in De Achterhoek and later also in the other two regions). This discourse was largely a response to a decline in services, such as the closure of local shops, libraries, public transport, schools, and other amenities. Local people and organizations worry about this loss of facilities and the consequences for the liveability of a place. This discourse helped to put the issue of population decline on the agenda, but it was much less influential on the selection of strategies and land use instruments. The planning system in the Netherlands that largely informed the first discourse on population decline, creating a powerful path-dependency for a number of reasons.

First of all it created a certain blind spot for population decline, an issue not deemed very relevant in a planning system that focusses on growth and on those regions in the Netherlands where growth can be facilitated. In general there wasn't much attention for the various regions that face population decline in the national debates on planning. Second, when population decline finally made it to the policy agenda, it was mostly understood from this dominant perspective, meaning that it was seen as a problem because of declining property values and related difficulties in initiating



new developments. Third, the selection of possible strategies and useful land use instruments were largely shaped by this planning system. This implied a preference for government initiated investments in large scale developments, such as new roads, housing projects and business parks. These investments were made in an attempt to attract people and businesses to the regions in order to re-create a situation of growth. A strategy that was adapted later on when it became clear that those investments could not prevent population decline. Despite the adaptation of strategies, instruments focussing on land development, such as regional agreements to distribute development rights and prevent a competition between municipalities over new developments, prevailed.

The dominant discourse on population decline was reinforced by the interdependencies between involved actors, mainly governments and experts on demography and spatial development. Governments became aware that the competition for inhabitants and business between municipalities would in general not benefit the region and that cooperation was needed. Yet at the same time each municipality had its interests and its own opportunities for developments, something which hampered cooperation. Experts played a prominent role in making predictions and developing solutions. Demographic predictions formed an important source of information, as did elaborations of expected socioeconomic consequences. The experts pointed to vicious circles between employment, number of jobs, housing markets, governmental policies, and a brain drain. As such, they reinforced the dominant discourse, as well as the idea that population decline was a problem that needed to be tackled by strategies that re-create growth.

Looking more closely at the three regions, one can witness gradual changes in the discourses about population decline and a related shift in the strategies for dealing with it. This co-evolution of discourses and strategies was different in each region. South-Limburg for a long time focussed on denial and investments in new developments, East- Groningen gradually became aware that population decline was to become a permanent issue and adapted policies and plans accordingly, while in De Achterhoek population decline became effective at a later moment, and partly drawing on the experiences from the two other regions, it focussed on facilitating a situation of decline from the beginning on. These difference can be explained by the differences in the dominant discourses amongst involved governments and the consequent way in which private parties and citizens were involved. In Groningen and Limburg, the issues were discussed mostly amongst governments, a fixed set of public organizations, and experts on real-estate planning. These actors largely drew on a discourse in which population decline was problematic and something that could be prevented with large-scale investments in new developments. In De Achterhoek, a larger group of actors, including citizen groups, were involved. This brought other issues to the fore and together the actors developed a perspective that focussed on facilitating population decline through smaller-scale interventions and an adaptation of land use policies to the changing situation.

Furthermore, differences can be found in the goal-dependencies. In all three regions facilitating growth was to some extent embedded in existing policies and plans and an important factor in the search for strategies, but the regions differed in the way existing policies and plans could be adapted to a changing situation. In Limburg it proved difficult to adapt these plans, partly because involved municipalities had clearly different perspectives and interests and as such common ground about the issue at stake and for coordinated actions was difficult to find. In East-Groningen and De Achterhoek plans were more easily adapted as a common ground evolved in relative early stages, making it easier to implement a collective and coordinated strategy to facilitate rather than prevent population decline.

In each region, the selection of particular strategies created new dependencies that subsequently shaped possibilities and limits for further actions. These dependencies followed from the goals that

have been institutionalized in policies, plans, and agreements between involved actors from resources that were invested in a particular way, and from specific forms of knowledge and expertise that were mobilized. These dependencies made it difficult to adapt initial strategies and related land use instruments after new insights emerged or when circumstances changed later on.

## **6. Conclusion and discussion**

The study shows that the governments in the three regions used mainly plans, regional agreements, and investments in physical infrastructure to deal with population decline, but differ in the problems they aim to solve and the goals they pursue. Comparison of the three regions shows that differences in strategies for dealing with population decline can largely be explained by the dominant understandings of actual or expected changes in a particular region and familiarity with certain strategies. In the Dutch situation, the most influential discourse on population decline draws on ideas about growth and the need for governments to stimulate spatial and economic developments via planning and land use instruments. Furthermore the selection of planning strategies was influenced by the role and competences of governmental organizations, available expertise, and the acceptance by the community of a particular planning approach. In all three regions, governmental organizations took the lead in the development of new strategies, mostly in the form of studies and strategic plans. Even though governments in regions facing population decline have in general fewer resources than governments elsewhere in the Netherlands (Hospers, 2014), they tend to become more active in various policy domains, including spatial planning, trying to uphold the governance capacity of the region.

As in many situations of boom and bust, the dominant ideas about growth and high governance capacity, resulting from boom situations, influenced developments and actions in time of bust (Sundaramurthy & Lewis, 2003; Collier 2007). More specific, our cases showed that the legacy of boom periods made it difficult for governments to accept population decline and in some cases, even to talk about it, partly because many elements of governance are based on a situation of economic growth. Just as a lack of institutional capacity might hamper effective action (Van Assche et al, 2019), the overestimation of the possibilities for planning can lead to unrealistic strategies and a loss of resources. The study confirms Van Assche et al.'s (2019) plea for encouraging reflexivity in governance and illustrates how Evolutionary Governance Theory can help in explaining why regions take different routes in dealing with population decline. The Dutch situation, with powerful planning capacities and the availability of various land use instruments, shows that the way in which governance capacity is used is strongly conditioned by dominant discourses on spatial planning and the issue at hand. The presence of particular discourses and their dominance in governance can be understood as path-dependencies that hamper the development of alternative futures and the search for strategies that differ from those that actors are familiar with (Deacon et al., 2018; Van Assche et al., 2017). This is for example the case with the discourse on planning as a stimulator and facilitator of (economic) development. However, especially in De Achterhoek case, it was shown that it was exactly the dominant discourse of an active community that fostered the introduction of more and different actors, e.g. citizen organisations in governance, something which helped in finding new perspectives on how to deal with population decline.

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